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Theology

Xavier Board of Higher Education in India
Correspondence Course **Vidyajyoti**

LESSON XII

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF GOD AS THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

I. INTRODUCTION

God as love and as triune

In Christian tradition God is regarded as constituted of love in his very essence. This tradition has all along been both intelligible and attractive because love is a very basic relationship in our individual and societal life. But when it comes to God as Trinity, it is a different story. God as Trinity makes us feel puzzled and mystified. God as love becomes God the elusive, the inaccessible, and stories and anecdotes about the incomprehensible aspect of this mystery, known as the Trinity, are passed on from teacher to pupil. It would appear that we have given stone for bread (Mt 7:9). Instead of an open coconut for the child to drink the juice, it is offered an unopened one instead. The mystery of the Trinity seems to confound us instead of benefitting us. Is this true? It is not, and in this lesson we shall make an effort to discover the treasure that is the Christian experience of God as Trinity, to savour its richness and show all the possible benefits that can accrue to individual and societal life. We shall see that the

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Trinitarian character of God is a direct and inevitable consequence of God's nature as love. A deeper understanding of the Trinity is all the more necessary if we are to dialogue with the followers of Islam who are unable to reconcile themselves to the idea of God as Trinity, and with our Hindu friends, especially those who confront us with a statement like:

> You have Trinity, and we have Trimurti and Saccidananda. You have Christ as God become man, and we have Krishna, God become man. What then is the difference? And, why do you want to convert us?

Indian society is becoming more and more open. Interest in religion and in the traditions of others is becoming more and more widespread. Thus the multi-religious situation in our country also calls for a deeper knowledge of the fundamental Christian belief in God as triune.

The fellowship within the triune God is leading the world to an universal fellowship.

With the advance of communication media there is a strong desire on the part of mankind to come together, and this has found expression in such movements as one-world government, one-world concept, the League of Nations and its modern counterpart, the United Nations, the world Court, and so on. A classless society, where everyone shares together the resources of the earth, and lives in comity and fellowship, proposed by Marxist philosophy, is also attracting many minds today. One cannot escape the impression that behind all these movements is the presence and action of God in history, guiding mankind to a definite end. In the light of this, the Christian experience of God as three-in-one assumes a new significance.

The triune God in liturgy and devotion

A child is baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". Hence the basic sacrament, baptism, is a consecration to the Trinity. Again

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the Christian couple, newly entering into the sacred bond of matrimony, is blessed "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". Indeed we can confidently confirm that Christian sacraments and the main prayers of Eucharistic liturgy reveal the significant role of the Trinity in the life of the Christian.

We can go further and state that on the lives of many saints of the Church the doctrine of the Trinity has had a great influence. Ignatius of Loyola, to mention one among these illustrious devotees, is probably one of the best examples. His letters and, above all, fragments of his diary, contain, in a remarkable way, testimonies of his being drawn to a personal devotion to and experience of the Trinity. Most of his prayers are addressed to the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity is another shining example. Her spirituality was centred round the Trinity in an eminent way. Hence there is need of a fruitful and reflective study on the mystery of the Trinity, a challenging undertaking indeed. We propose to make this study in a series of steps:

1. In order to highlight and stress the pattern of God's revelation in the Jewish Christian tradition we shall undertake this study in the broad perspective of world religions.

2. Divine-human relationship and the pattern of communication in the Old Testament is briefly considered in the light of the entire biblical revelation.

3. The specific trinitarian revelation as it takes place in the New Testament is outlined.

4. We study the interesting process of the Christian community struggling with the new knowledge. The well-known trinitarian councils and their formulations are briefly presented.

5. The strenuous efforts of theologians, faced with the task of making the mystery intelligible to human perception, are described.

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6. In an effort to do the same in our own Indian context, we ask ourselves what the revelation of God in Jesus Christ means to the people of India.

II. EXPERIENCE OF GOD IN WORLD RELIGIONS

The perspective in which we are invited to a serious study of the world religions is given to us in the following sentence from Vatican II - Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions *(Nostra Aetate)*.

> From ancient times down to the present, there has existed among diverse peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a supreme divinity and of a supreme Father too.

This authoritative declaration, giving some degree of recognition to these religions, is significant. It takes serious note of the almost universal **phenomenon of religion**, from the earliest times to this day, in all peoples and nations. That means man always pondered over the mystery of life as it unfolds itself especially through life's events. Art, architecture, sculpture, literature, myths and symbols, beliefs and practices, all these mirrored this religious dimension of man. Here is Geoffrey Parrinder, well-known authority on religions, testifying to this:

> From the earliest times of pre-history down to the present day, men have expressed their deepest convictions about the universe and mortal life in worship and in symbol. All the arts have been brought into the service of religion: architecture and sculpture, painting and writing, music and costume.
>
> **Encyclopedia of World Religions:** "Man and his Gods", ed. G. Parrinder, p. 7.

Life, its meaning and goal, its value and fulfillment appear to belong to the essence of these religions. They are found to be essentially linked with the transcendent dimension of every reality in this world.

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In India we have the religious experience of the Rigveda. In Greece, Socrates, going further, came to believe in the immortality of the soul as well as in a divine 'Genius'; a kind of conscience-oracle that spoke to man, offering him moral and ethical guidance.

Animism is a term coined by Edward Taylor to describe his theory of the world religious experience among the primitive peoples and tribes. James Frazer in his book **Golden Bough** (1890) tried to explain much of these in terms of the magical. **Wilhelm Schmidt** of the Vienna School of religious anthropology proposed his theory that went beyond these two authors. According to his findings and their interpretation, *in all forms of religiosity, man worshipped one supreme being. Even polytheism is essentially monotheistic in its basic features.*

Relationship and **unity** seem to underlie all religious beliefs, experiences and practices: relationship between man and God or gods, between man and nature and between man and man. First of all, relationship is sought between man and the transcendent. A complex of divine persons and names marks this transcendent realm. The sky gods, the sun gods, the moon gods, the earth goddess, the god of time - these sum up most of the divine personages. Secondly, to enter into relationship with these gods, offerings and sacrifices are performed. Communion with them appears to be the ultimate objective of these rituals. Finally, the groups that engaged in such cultic performances always felt a very close relationship and kinship among themselves. This relationship often extended even to the natural forces which determined the life of man.

The significance of the above brief survey is quite clear. The call of Abraham by Yahweh away from his ancestral religio-cultural environment was commonly understood as a break with the polytheistic past to a monotheistic future. In the light of the modern study of religions, it may be far more accurate to affirm that both continuity and discontinuity characterize Abraham's step. It was not a sharp replacement of multiplicity by unicity, but a slow growth from polytheism to monotheism.

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III. JEWISH MONOTHEISTIC EXPERIENCE

It is possible to appreciate the richness of the trinitarian revelation with the help of the pattern of divine communication as it takes place in the Jewish religious tradition.

1. Election and Covenant. The God who called Abraham in order to make him progenitor of a new religious tradition, is called by various names: God Almighty ('El Shaddai', meaning: God, the One of the mountains) (Gen 17:1); God Most High (Gen 14:22); God Everlasting (Gen 21:33). The title 'El', found among many groups sharing a common culture in and around Palestine, is understood differently in the Jewish context because of one decisive factor : the **election**. The term conveys the impression and the lasting conviction of a people that God was actively involved in their life-struggle. Moses who encounters that God on the mountain in the experience of the burning bush, is told that he is 'Yahweh'. Modern exegetes are beginning to give this term a more complete rendering, such as He-who-causes-to-become, although the traditional rendering was I-am-who-am (Samuel Terrien, Biblical Theology Bulletin, No. 2. XII, No. 4. Oct. 1982).

The most profound human experience, like enslavement and degradation in a foreign land, becomes the starting point for the active involvement of this God in the life of the people. It is in the midst of such experiences that the attention of the human minds turns towards the divine, and questions are rais d. This is what Paul did when he was struck down from the horse on his disastrous trip to Damascus. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" We find Moses too raising similar questions, "Who are you?" The basis for an irrevocable relationship between man and God is being forged.

A decisive turn in God-man relationship is taken when the Jewish people under the inspiring leadership of Moses are invited to make permanent this bond by a covenant.

So we see Moses mediating between God and the people leading to a covenant, which is sealed by a

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sacrifice. The significance of the covenant may be articulated as follows:

> If you live according to my laws and obey my commands . . . . . I will give you peace in your land . . . . . You will be victorious over your enemies . . . . . I will live among you in my sacred tent, and I will never turn away from you; I will be your God and you will be my people.
>
> **Lev 26**

The sealing of the covenant was significant. With it begins a series of special interventions by God in the life-struggle of the people. Expressions are found in the Old Testament that concretely embody these interventions through which Yahweh convinced the people of his constant presence with them. Since these help us considerably in our effort to understand the God of the New Testament, they are recalled here briefly.

2. Glory. Many of the theophanies in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament are marked by certain phenomena. Thus a cloud descended upon the Tent of Meeting as soon as Moses entered it (Ex 33) and this cloud suddenly shone with splendour and glory, reminiscent of the presence of Yahweh as the people sojourned through the desert for years before their coming to the valley of Sinai. What glory signifies, is not very easy to describe.

It was definitely a perceptible dimension or sign of the divine presence. Because of the intimate association of this phenomenon with all theophanies, authors are inclined to hold that glory is something that belonged immediately to Yahweh himself, a part of this very being.

Ezekiel's vision preceding his call by Yahweh, gives a detailed picture of the presence of the cloud and of the glory and the fire that surround it (Ezek 1:4 ff).

3. Wisdom. One of the principal categories through which the conviction of the people of Israel grew that Yahweh was effectively present with them and guiding them was the concept of wisdom. We are familiar with

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the concept of wisdom in human affairs. It is the sum total of insights, a guiding and discerning power in man, assisting him in his daily decisions and their execution, through whose operation one builds up one's life. Israel, as well as the neighbouring cultures, had an abundance of stories, proverbs and sayings, all of which show to what extent wisdom had grown among these peoples. The very phenomenon of coming to Egypt, their successful survival and even growth in that region to the extent that the Egyptians feared that they would soon overpower them, all show to what extent the Jewish people had succeeded in promoting and fostering wisdom. But several disasters overtook and almost annihilated them. Probably the worst was the exile and deportation to Babylon. Such events produced frustration in the collective consciousness of the people striking at the root of their faith in everything. Collapse of the human skill and wisdom, however, brought in its wake another consciousness.

It was the awareness of the presence in their midst of a power and force distinct from all they knew so far. This power and force that guided them and energized them was one in which the people soon began to find security, comfort and assurance. It eventually grew to become a spiritual concept. a transcendent principle and power.

The background of the concept of wisdom in the Old Testament is thus traceable to the ordinary experience of the people in their life-struggle, in which soon they unfailingly detected the hand of God.

It was quite natural that this divine guiding force or principle, closely associated with Yahweh, began to be regarded as an agent of Yahweh, as coming from Yahweh, but not yet identified with Yahweh.

When there was no deep ocean, I was brought forth
When there was no fountain of water . . . . . .
When he established the sky I was present . . . .
I was beside him as the master workman
I was his delight day by day . . . . . .
and finding my delight in the children of men

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It was their belief that this wisdom is available to all men:

> Beside the gates that lead to the city,
> in the entrance, Wisdom cries aloud:
> To you, O men, I call,
> my appeal is to the sons of men
>
> **(Prov 8:22-31)**

Certain ethnocentric features of the religion and practices of Israel, did not prevent a recognition of the almost universal availability of wisdom. However it was also their conviction, part of the entire Old Testament religious experience and practice, that it was they who in a special way enjoyed the providence of God. And so we find that while this Wisdom went round the globe in search of acceptance and a permanent dwelling place, it was told: "pitch your tent in Jacob, and have your heritage in Israel". We may conclude with the following remarks:

> Wisdom is the form in which Yahweh's will reaches man in his concrete situation. Wisdom is the essence of what man needs for a proper life, and of what God grants him.
>
> **Von Rad**

4. Word. Closely associated with the above experience is the concept of the Word. Beginning with the call of Abraham an awareness of a special personal presence of Yahweh in the midst of Israel prevailed among them. The most concrete and effective expression of this their faith is the Word (of God).

In ordinary human understanding the spoken word is an emanation of the human person in all its depth. The word embodies the inner power and truthfulness. An unfailing power is attached to the concept of word. Consequently words emanating from persons eminent in holiness, truthfulness, authority etc. are capable of affecting the object or person towards whom the spoken word's intention or meaning is directed. Blessing or curse is believed to take effect once these are expressed by

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means of the spoken word. We have examples in Indian classics of the irate sage Durvasas whose curse of Sakuntala could not be revoked even by the sage himself. Only alternative remedies are applicable to forestall its evil effects. The word's power will have its course. In the Old Testament the barter between Esau and Jacob, in order to secure entirely for oneself the blessings of Isaac, and the tricks employed by Jacob and his mother, are further illustrations of the almost universal belief in the power of the spoken word. Thus the death sentence, uttered by the prophet Nathan on David for his misdeed, has to have its effect, and the child is the victim (2 Sam 12).

In the Old Testament the word of Yahweh is highlighted for its creative role and efficacy in a variety of ways. Referring to its power Jeremiah says that it is a hammer that shatters the rocks (Jer 3:29). The prophets are endowed with this power precisely in the discharge of the function for which they have been selected and sent by Yahweh to the people of Israel.

> The lion has roared, who will not fear?
> The Lord God has spoken. Who can refuse to prophesy?

Amos 3:8

The text shows the conviction even of the prophets that it is the power of Yahweh that is operating through them. By its effects the prophets are changed. All creation is attributed to Yahweh who does this work by the mere utterance of his word:

> By the word of the Lord the heavens were made; and all their host by the breath of his mouth

Ps 33.8

The entire Genesis account is the source of this belief in the power of the word of God in creating everything. The Exodus experience is a confirmation of this belief in the power and the role of the word of God in Israel. Destiny of individuals and nations

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seems to depend upon the word that is entrusted to the prophets (Jer 23:29).

In line with the many other similar developments we notice the next phase of the same trend: **personification of the word.**

The Word is regarded as a person sent by Yahweh (Is. 9:6). One of the functions of the Word sent by Yahweh is to enlighten minds and hearts and train them in the way of the Lord (Ps 119).

In the light of the New Testament revelation the Word in the Old Testament will assume unique significance.

5. Spirit. By far the most familiar and universal expression of the popular awareness of God's presence and action in the life of man is the concept of **spirit. Wind** outside man in nature, and **breath** within man, are often made use of to understand and to express what people felt to be the power of the spirit. There are valid foundations for this: the cloud-carrying stormy wind, that visits fields and mountains and valleys, shakes the entire region with its irresistible power and scatters life-giving rain all over the land. In its wake we notice a sudden irruption of life, filling the entire landscape with a fresh green vitality. In like manner, the presence or absence of life in any individual is closely associated with the presence or absence of breath. Breath and wind are almost identified with life.

The earliest evidence of this close identification of wind with the spirit or power of God is found in the creation account in the Bible. There is an undeniable link between the

Spirit of God that was moving over the face of the waters.

Gen 1:2

and the creative energy of the wind at the blowing of which the sea turned and the Egyptians the mighty waters (Ex 15:10). The very creation, and

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the coming forth of life in it, are attributed to the power of the 'wind' sent by Yahweh:

> When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created, and thou renewest the face of the ground
>
> **Ps 103:29**

Even the life of man is produced by the breath of God that animates him (Gen 2). In these and similar accounts the spirit of God is a force similar to the wind, a nature-phenomenon, but in immediate contact with Yahweh. For this wind dwells, along with the rain and other elements, in the mysterious places where God alone rules (Prov 30:4).

Gradually the conviction emerges and grows in Israel that this wind belongs to God, it comes from God; indeed it is the spirit of God.

However, there is no mention yet of any belief that the spirit is God. It still remains a creature of God, **very closely associated with God, endowed with powers that are mysterious.**

A significant step in the evolution of the concept of the spirit takes place with the belief that **this power is involved in salvation history.** Thus prophets and others are assisted by this spirit of God. The spirit of Yahweh seized on David (1 Sam 16:13). Upon the coming Messiah, the ideal king of the day to come, the spirit of Yahweh will rest permanently. The king will be endowed with special supernatural insights and gifts, like the spirit of counsel and wisdom, of understanding and knowledge and godliness (Is 11:2). Extraordinary manifestations are predicted when the spirit of the Lord will be poured out on the people 'in those days' (Ezek 36:25 ff).

In the course of this brief survey certain patterns in the experience of God's dealings with the people appear, and they acquire great significance in the light of the New Testament experience. Beneath them one sees a **strong and uncompromising insistence on monotheism.** Any departure from this faith in a

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monotheistic God was unthinkable. We find many prophets struggling hard to maintain the purity of faith of the people in the one true God.

IV. TRINITARIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Already in the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth, and especially after his resurrection, among the believers drawn especially from the Jewish religio-cultural background, a new awareness and conviction was growing and gaining ground. This centred round the person of Jesus of Nazareth, his works and certain of his own utterances. These amounted to certain divine claims, a thing which proved a chief source of opposition to Jesus' own life and teaching. However, and inspite of such opposition, this new awareness keeps growing hesitatingly, and it gradually acquires a momentum that cannot be resisted. The sources of this new awareness have to be briefly recalled.

1. Paul. Already in the earliest of New Testament writings we find the gradual change taking place. Thus in the writings of Paul, we find explicit and bold assertions of a new belief in God, **not now in terms of Yahweh, but in terms sometimes of the 'Lord Jesus' and the 'Father', and sometimes of the 'Spirit'.** Thus we have the famous liturgical blessing in 2 Cor 13:13.

> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy spirit be with you all.

The very personal love of the Father and Christ is incarnated and communicated through the Spirit. All these are implied here. In an equally important text (1 Cor 12:4-6), Paul introduces not only the same belief, but also its role and effects in the very life of the Christians. The charisms come from the Father and Christ, and the Spirit freely distributes them among the faithful. Paul even talks of the Father in relation to us, although it is the Father of Our Lord Jesus. Christ's relationship to creation comes for reflection in 1 Cor 8.6.

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. . . . . for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The relation that is affirmed here, of Christ and the universe, including of course the human race, is significant.

Paul often refers to God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; Col 1:3). Paul as a Jew, is steeped in rabbinic tradition and teaching. In the OT God is held as Father of Israel, but even more specifically as Father of those he sends on a particular mission. Thus the king (like David and Solomon) is the son of God. This helps us to understand better what Paul means when he speaks of God as Father of Jesus Christ. **He has sent Jesus on a mission.**

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who consoles us in every trouble. For as we experience richly the sufferings of Christ, so we enjoy through Christ an abundance of consolation.
>
> **2 Cor 1:3-5**

God is the Father of Jesus whom he sends on a mission of mercy to bring us the divine comfort. Note in the passages referred to above the reference to Christ as Lord. Writing as he does to Christians who are predominantly Greek-speaking, Paul is careful in the use of the word. The 'divine sphere' figures frequently in Greek writings and religious beliefs. Paul, in these texts, has definitely in mind divine connotations when he used titles like the Lord.

Jesus is Son at two levels: human and divine. He is Son of God at one level, and at the other he is a descendant of David and is born of a woman.

> . . . . . the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the

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Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead . . . . .

Son - Redemptive mission of Christ: **Rom 1:3**

The title Son is still used here in a functional sense, referring as it does to the redemptive mission of Christ because of which "we have received grace and apostleship" (ibid). The same emphasis on the two aspects of Jesus is again found in Gal 4:4.

> But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Galatians 4:4

Then Paul comes to a very illuminating description of the role of these three 'persons' in God (to anticipate an expression),

> And because you are sons. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father'. So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

Jesus became the first-born Son among many brothers. **Gal 4:6, 7**

The Sonship of Jesus is specified by his function of enabling us to become sons of God. Jesus becomes the "first-born son among many brothers" (Rom 8:29).

Jesus is the image of invisible -

Another meaning of Son is image. Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). The image resembles the object from which it takes its origin. Accordingly for Paul, Jesus is the image of God and his Son by way of origin. The whole of creation also originates from God. Yet the origin of Jesus is fundamentally different for

> he is the first-born of all creation for through him all things were created, in heaven and on earth . . . . . they are all created through him and for him.

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Col 1:15-17

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In this text Paul is quite emphatic in the affirmation of his faith in Jesus as divine. Another such text, and a very important one, is Phil 2:6-11. Besides being in one of the earliest of Pauline letters, it is also a liturgical text, which makes it doubly important. For it implies that Christ's divinity is already accepted by the community that assembled regularly for worship. Two conditions or states of being are highlighted here: that of being divine as well as of being human. The descent into the human takes place inspite of his being divine or, as hinted in another text, **because** of his being in the divine realm or sphere,

> for the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily in him.
>
> **Col 2:9**

What Paul has to say on the **Spirit** has to be considered next. There are a number of occasions where Paul talks of the life of the new man in terms of life in the Spirit, life dominated and inspired by the Spirit. The newness derives its efficacy from the power of the Spirit, which is often identified with the life of the risen Christ.

Romans 8:9.

The Spirit in Paul is the power of God and the principle of the new life that a Christian received. It is divine life. It is the power that reaches man as a result of Christ's glorification. By the presence and operation of this Spirit within, one can be assured of the continued presence of Christ in each of us (Rom 8:9).

Consequently Paul so frequently uses expressions like 'in Christ' and 'in the Spirit', both of which give the impression of referring to an identical function. The power that was at work in the resurrection of Christ, will also operate in all of us in an identical manner, and raise us up too (1 Cor 6:14). It is the same Spirit that dwells in each one (Rom 8:11). Thus the fundamental hope and optimism that characterize the life of the Christian is because of this "power of the **Holy Spirit**" (Rom 15:13). A complete transformation of the old man, weakened by the power of the body subject to sin and corruption is promised to those who will accept the spirit (Rom 8:11).

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These are only a few of the numerous texts wherein Paul talks of the role and power of the Spirit that dwells in man, and transforms him, making a new man.

2. The letter to the Hebrews. The treatment of the letter to the Hebrews is based upon the faith of its author in the unique character of Christ. There is possibly only one mention of the 'Father', in 12:9, where God is regarded as the "Father of spirits". But when our study turns on Christ, a remarkable growth is noticeable from the beginning till the end. This effort to establish Christ as Son reaches its climax in chapter 7.

The letter begins by comparing the nature and role of the 'Son' with that of other less powerful spirits. He is superior to all of them. In chapter 5 we have the application to Christ of the enthronement psalm (Ps 2) by which the superior nature of Christ is insisted upon. The same text is used by Peter in order to affirm the unique position of Christ (Acts 2:24). While treating Christ as Son, a definite contrast is struck between a prophet and the Son. There is the implied affirmation of more direct relationship between Christ and the Father. **Christ is his Son**. Whereas the early priests, offered many sacrifices, which had a limited efficacy, Christ, the Son, offered one sacrifice once and for all. What many priests, by repeated performances, over years and centuries, were not able to accomplish, Christ did by a single sacrifice, which was thus endowed with a unique efficacy.

Thus we notice that although we may not have direct and explicit statements, the conclusion of all these texts is quite clear : **Christ is unique. He is eternal. Therefore he is divine**.

3. Synoptics. In Mt 28:19 we have a very interesting formula explicitating the belief of the early Church in the Trinity.

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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Although the text looks like the very words of Christ, yet biblical scholars are agreed that it reflects the faith of the early Christian community and therefore not necessarily the very words of Christ. Most probably it is a liturgical formula. Baptism was always a consecration to the Trinity, as understood by the early Church, and that is what is expressed here.

Again in Mt 16:16 we have Peter's famous expression of faith:

> You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

This too is regarded by most biblical scholars as an expression of the faith of the early Christian community. However, the point to be recalled here is that Christ is **already regarded as somehow related to God in a unique way**, being called the Son of God, although no effort was made to explain how that could be, especially in the context of the very strong monotheistic faith the early Christian community had inherited. It is in this spirit that we should glean the significance of another text, Mt 18:20, where Christ says,

> Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

This 'gathering in my name' refers to an age-old Jewish traditional rabbinic practice - of studying the law together as a group and assurance of a certain enlightening and guiding Presence. The claim of Christ to be present wherever such gathering of the faithful takes place thus implies that the community has already **accepted the claims of Jesus to a divine relationship**, and hence also accepted his presence among the faithful.

4. John. All through the **Johannine writings** we notice that Christ asserts or claims a unique relationship with the Father and this relationship is one of **origin**. The prologue of the gospel, the three letters and Revelation, all contribute to the building up of this impression. At the level of the mission, an identification is seen in Jn 10:30-39. There is a certain claim to equality with God.

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The Father and I are one.

A similar claim is found boldly made in 5:17, and the same claim acquires a deeper dimension when Christ claims a relation of origin:

I have come in my Father's name.

5:43

Because of such relationship, many texts in John become clearer and many a saying of Jesus about his being in the Father and his Father being in him, further strengthen the same claim. Consequently, the faith of the early Christian community, as it began to reflect upon the meaning and significance of the new knowledge about God that came to them with the advent of Jesus, took a new direction unprecedented in many ways.

There is one more dimension to the Johannine writings about Jesus' divine claims. Not only does he hint at a relationship with the Father, but mention is made of another source, another centre, in the same divine sphere. This is known as the Spirit. The discourse after the supper gives us a few indications of this new dimension, which grows into fullness after the resurrection experience. We can summarize all that Jesus spoke about the Spirit in the following manner:

After he has gone back to the Father he will send another paraclete; whose mission is similar to that of Christ; this Spirit will be with the Apostles to further Jesus' mission; this Spirit will attest to the world about Christ, expose the errors of the world, and will guide the world; all this is precisely the work and mission of Christ; hence by implication, the Spirit also has its origin from above, from the Father.

Our exploration through the Bible, rapid and cursory though it be, leads us to certain profound impressions. The word 'trinity' is never used. What we have are hints and suggestions, replete with meaning and profound implications, of the trinitarian character of God that manifests itself through the events and words of the

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entire Scriptures. There was a new consciousness in the first Christian community as it encountered God revealing himself in history through the life and works of Jesus Christ and through his continued presence in the Church by means of the Spirit. This was as startling an awareness as it was new to a community reared in the Old Testament monotheistic tradition. It is our task next to watch the reaction of the early Church and trace the development of its doctrine.

V THE TRINITARIAN DOGMA

1. Growth of the dogma in the early Church

On watching this development, one is struck by the fact that it is gradual and a growth from within. The first step is the belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the **Christ** (the Anointed One, the Messiah) (Acts 2:36; 10:36; Col 2:6; 1 Jn 2:22). Linked with this is the proclamation that Jesus the Christ is the **Lord** (1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9; Acts 2:36; Phil 2:11). The most important aspect of the belief in Jesus is that Jesus is the **Son of God** (Acts 9:20; 13:33; Rom 1:4; Heb 4:14; Jn 4:15). The belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord and the Son of God implies his divine origin and his divine character. Once this is accepted, the next implied truth is his relation with the Father and the Spirit. Furthermore, together with the divine character of the Father and of the Son, that of the Spirit is also accepted.

The three-fold affirmation of Father, Son and Spirit forms the three parts of the **profession of faith** of the early church which later came to be called the Symbol of the Apostles, or the Apostles' Creed. It may be stated here that the present text is not composed by the Apostles. The earliest form must have been something like this:

> I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in his only begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and in the resurrection of all flesh and in the Holy Catholic Church.

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These all too simple affirmations have evolved into the long version of the 'Creed'.

We should also note that these professions are intimately linked with those rites whereby one becomes a member of the new community. Most liturgical documents either explicitly or implicitly, contain this profession of faith. One of the earliest references is in what is known today as the **Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus**. Baptism is administered accordingly, 'in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. The one being baptized undergoes a triple immersion in water. Each immersion is supposedly with reference to each of the Persons of the Trinity. St. Ireneus, a contemporary, speaks as follows :

> We have received baptism for the remission of sins in the name of the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became incarnate and died and was raised, and in the name of the Holy Spirit of God.

St. Justin too refers to the tradition of invoking the Father, the Saviour and the Holy spirit. All these point to a very important practice, namely, that of baptism being regarded as essentially a Trinitarian rite; it dedicates the new Christian to the three Persons.

Along with this, the doxologies also take form. The early ones do not yet include the Spirit :

> Yours is the glory and power through Jesus Christ forever.

Later on the doxologies grow to include the Spirit too. Glory to the Father is through Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

The collective mental context of the first generation of Christians can be summed up in the following manner. They were for the first time in their history of faithfulness to Yahweh, faced with a most formidable situation. For, according to their basic and traditional belief, God is absolutely and uncompromisingly **one**. This they cannot in any way sacrifice or compromise. With almost equal

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conviction they accept the **divinity of Jesus Christ**. He too is God. But this second proposition is indeed a serious threat to their old belief, and yet neither their old belief nor the new one can be rejected. It is the same with regard to their acceptance of the Spirit. So what are they to do? The claims of the new knowledge are so convincing that they are as good as those that prompted them to accept the old. Therefore, they were faced with the only alternative that made them truthful to both : **both the old and the new demand explanation, synthesis and integration**. The events leading to the Council of Nicea centred round this problem. It took almost three centuries before the task of evolving a doctrine of the Trinity was accomplished. In the following section these events are traced and reflected upon briefly.

2. Work of the Trinitarian councils

a. Explaining revealed truth

Confronted with the problem of reconciling the two decisive phases of Christian revelation, theologians began to make efforts to render it intelligible, to explain it. A divinely revealed truth of its very nature transcends our limited human understanding. The question that arises is how such a truth can be made 'intelligible' or can be 'explained'. Obviously, the mystery cannot be explained as a clockmaker explains the working of a clock by showing how it works or a doctor makes intelligible the symptoms of a disease by listing their causes. To make a mystery intelligible is to make it more precise, less liable to be misunderstood. This would involve applying to it human categories of thought, yet in a way that does not distort the revealed truth. However, many of the efforts at explanation did result in distortions. They were the errors or heresies.

b. Heresies

It was at the end of the second century that the first group of erroneous explanations began making an appearance. These, though of varied nuances, can be grouped under the heading: **MONARCHIANISM. Basically** the name applies to an interpretation of the trinitarian

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mystery which reduces the three to one (*mono* = one; *arche* = principle). Monarchianism continued well into the 3rd century under various forms, which can be summed up as follows:

i. The Father is God. The man Jesus is **not** really God, but man. However he becomes divine through the **Spirit** of God coming to rest on him and to dwell in him at the baptism in the Jordan. God adopts the man Jesus, invests him with the divinity and makes him his Son. This interpretation is known as ADOPTIONISM. Its chief proponent was **Theodotus**.

ii. A slightly different form of adoptionist monarchianism is that of **Paul of Samosata**. According to him the **Word** of God dwells in the **man** Jesus as in a temple and makes him divine.

iii. Jesus is not different from the Father at all. He is the Father. It is therefore really the Father who becomes incarnate, dies and rises from the dead. This position is called PATRIPASSIANISM (*pater* = father; *passio* - suffering). It was defended by **Noetus**.

iv. **Sabellius** compared the Trinity to the triad: sun-warmth-light. Warmth and light are but manifestations of the sun revealing its presence. In the same way Son and Spirit are manifestations of the Father. They were called **modes** of self-expression of the Father. Hence this interpretation was named MODALISM.

c. Defence of the faith

Monarchianism distorts the trinitarian mystery by destroying its "threeness". It led to a great deal of controversy. The chief opponents of monarchianism were

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St. Ireneus, Bishop of Lyons, and Tertullian. The major concern and contribution of Ireneus is the **unity** or the oneness of the Godhead along with the distinct character of the three.

> Those who are bearers of the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is, to the Son; and the Son takes them and presents them to the Father and the Father confers incorruptibility. So without the Spirit there is no seeing the Word of God, and without the Son there is no approaching the Father. For the Son is knowledge of the Father and the knowledge of the Son is through the Holy Spirit . . . . . .
>
> **Ireneus**

What he says is that the functions of the three are varied and each exercises his own function in the economy of salvation. Yet the three are one.

> Christ is not a God other than the Father. There is unity in the divine economy of revelation, for the Son is the revelation of the Father . . . . . Furthermore, as the revealing Word shares in the Godhead of the creating Father, so does the sanctifying Spirit; for the sanctification of men which he works is the fulfillment of God's salvific design.
>
> **Ireneus**

Tertullian's emphasis is more in the distinctness of the three.

> This Trinity, then, is equality of substance, of state, of power, but a diversity and hierarchy of properties, which distinguish the persons . . . . . There is also a plurality without division . . . . . The Son is of the substance of the Father, they are, both one and the other, together with the Spirit, of the same substance. They are also inseparable without difference. The Son comes out of the Father as a ray of light from the sun, as a river from its source, as plant from the seed. And the Holy Spirit, the third after Father and Son', is the fruit that

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> issues from the plant, the rivulet that issues from the river, the light that comes forth from the ray . . . . . There is then between the Father and the Son unity of substance, and personal distinction in relation to origin. When I say the Son. I say some other from the Father, not as regards substance, but as regards person; there is then distinction, but not division.

Notice how Tertullian is struggling with words and their underlying concepts. He speaks of unity and equality of substance, diversity of properties and personal distinction in relation to origin, plurality without division. The Monarchians also struggle with words and concepts (adoption, modes). The comparisons were also very similar. Sabellius compares the Trinity to sun-warmth-light, Tertullian to sun-ray-light. The only difference (and it is a world of difference!) is that the Monarchian (or any erroneous) formulation destroys one pole of the mystery (in this case, the distinctness of the three) through an exaggerated emphasis on the other pole (oneness). **The genuine Christian formulation tries to maintain both poles in balance**. Error lies in making the datum of revelation fit into human concepts in such a way that it gets distorted in the process of being made comprehensible. Truth is sacrificed to human intelligibility.

For the true Christian, it is not revelation that has to be made to fit into human categories, but rather these categories have to be adapted to the revealed truth which is made more precise and at the same time preserved undistorted and in utter transcendence to human comprehension.

It is interesting to note that Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, opposed the modalism of Sabellius so vehemently that he almost fell into the opposite error of an exaggerated emphasis on distinctness of the three. He came very close to conceiving of three Gods (TRITHEISM). The group of errors that falsely emphasize distinctness is known as SUBORDINATIONISM. This false emphasis makes them separate Son from Father. But

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two equal autonomous beings would be against monotheism. To avoid this pitfall they make the Son inferior and subordinate to the Father. Divinity is virtually denied to the Son who is reduced to a super creature.

The battle over monarchianism became the occasion for a first important statement on the Trinity by Pope Dionysius (year 262). He struck the correct balance between the distinction of the divine persons and their unity and equality.

> Next I should rightly speak against those who divide, dismember, and so destroy the divine oneness (monarchia), this most august teaching of the Church of God, into three powers and separate beings (Gk. *hupostaseis*) and into three Godheads. For I have heard that among you some preachers and teachers of the divine word hold this opinion which is, so to speak, diametrically opposed to the teaching of Sabellius. It is his (Sabellius') blasphemy that the Son is the Father and vice versa, whereas they somehow preach three gods as they divide the sacred unity into three different beings (*hupostaseis*) entirely separate from each other. The Word of God must necessarily be united with the God of all, and the Holy Spirit must abide and dwell in God; it is also necessary that the divine Trinity be recapitulated and led back to One, as to a supreme point that is to the almighty God of all things.
>
> **Neuner-Dupuis, The Christian Faith, No. 301**

d. Arianism

It was around this time that **Arius** appears on the scene. An austere, pious and learned priest of Alexandria. Arius exercised considerable influence in the Egyptian capital. Arius insists uncompromisingly on the **uniqueness of God**. He then reflects on a very fundamental element of the trinitarian mystery - the relationship between Father and Son. Col 1:15 describes Christ as "the firstborn Son superior to all created things". Taking his cue from this and other similar texts.

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he describes the Son with the Greek word *gennetos* which can be translated as begotten, born or originate. We use the same word even today and call Christ the only-begotten Son of God. But for Arius this way of conceiving the Son had important logical implications. God is *agennetos* - unoriginate. If the Son is *gennetos*, he cannot possibly be God, neither can he be eternal. The originator has necessarily to pre-exist the originate so that, according to Arius : "Before he was begotten or created or appointed or established, he did not exist; for he was not unbegotten". This is a superb example of subordinating the divine mystery to human logic . According to Arius, the Son could not be God in a true sense but only metaphorically. He would really be only a creature, even if pre-eminent among all creation.

e. The Council of Nicea

The influence of Arius and the dangers inherent in his teaching were so great that, as Harnack observes, it would probably have brought about the downfall of Christianity. No wonder the Church acted quickly by summoning the Council of Nicea in 325. Most of the 318 bishops who attended it were from the east. The bishop of Rome was absent but sent Athanasius as his delegate. Arianism was condemned. But Arius refused to abjure and was sent into exile. The council simply affirmed the Christian faith that the Word is God. They kept the description *gennetos* for the Son but asserted that he is **not created** ("begotten not made" as we say in the creed at Mass). In this way the significance of *gennetos* was reshaped. The generation is eternal. The originator does not exist prior to the originate. Both exist in eternity. This was the only proper way of thinking - making human logic subservient to the divine mystery.

In affirming the Son's true divinity as against a metaphor, the council declared:

> The Son is the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God . . . . . of one substance (consubstantial) with the Father. (Greek : *homoousios*. *Homo* = equal, *Ousia* = substance).

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Note these phrases are familiar to us from the longer creed used at Mass. called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed.

In terms of clarity much was accomplished by the council. Dogmatic formulations were made, official sanction was accorded, imperial support was forthcoming, and an overall enthusiasm was manifest.

The principal champion of the Nicene doctrine against the Arians was Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. He wrote:

> The generation of the Son from the Father is otherwise than that which accords with the nature of men; and he is not only like, but is in fact inseparable from the substance of the Father. He and the Father are indeed one, as he did say himself (Jn 10:30); and the Word is ever in the Father and the Father in the Word, as is the way of radiance in relation to light. The term itself indicates this; and the council, so understanding the matter, did well, therefore, when it wrote *homoousios*, so that it might defeat the perverseness of the heretics, while proclaiming that the Word is other than created things.

Inspite of all Athanasius' opposition, Arius' teaching did not die but continued to live, especially through his followers, and Arius was recalled from exile and became a favourite of the very Emperor who had him exiled; and the champion of Nicea, Athanasius, was forced into exile. The controversy was revived. Another council was called. This assembled at Constantinople and is named the Council of Constantinople I.

f. The Councils of Constantinople

The first Council of Constantinople was called in 381 for two reasons: to deal with the revival of the Arian controversy after Nicea and to settle the question of the Holy Spirit. It needs no clarification that the question of the divinity of Christ is related also to that of the Holy Spirit. The faith in the Holy Spirit is from the very beginning essential to Christianity. We have already seen the Scriptural position on this. The problem was broached

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for the first time at the Synod of Alexandria (362). Here the Fathers had firmly asserted that:

> If by participation of the Spirit we become participants of the divine nature, he will truly be mad who says that the Spirit belongs to the order of created nature, and those in whom he is found are divine too. For if he divinizes, there is no doubt that his nature is that of God.

The first Council of Constantinople was attended by 150 bishops all from the east. The bishop of Rome was not present nor was he represented. Since no bishop from the west attended the council, its representative character was questioned. But the Roman Church later recognized the Council of Constantinople I as being equal to those of Nicea, Ephesus and Chalcedon.

The council fathers were unanimous in their faith in the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **The council affirmed the consubstantiality and distinction of the three divine Persons**. The title of divine Lordship belongs as much to the Spirit as to the Son. The Spirit is 'life-giving', He proceeds from the Father, yet remaining in the Father. Hence the Spirit is equal to the Father and the Son.

The progress so far achieved can be summed up in the words of St. Gregory of Nazianzen:

> God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit: they are three as to their personal properties, but one Godhead.

The second Council of Constantinople (553) shows, perhaps, the completion of the task of the early Church. According to it God is a **consubstantial Trinity**: one Godhead in three Persons. What is **plural** in God was called 'person' and what is one was called 'nature' or 'essence' or 'substance'.

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VI. THEOLOGY OF THE TRINITY

1. Understanding a mystery

The dogmatic formulations of the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople are the efforts of the early Church to understand the mystery of the God who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit - a consubstantial Trinity. This has not exhausted the understanding of the mystery. There is always scope for deeper penetration. The type of understanding we are dealing with is the application of human concepts to revealed truth. **But no set of human concepts can adequately express a divine reality**. To make a non-erroneous formulation the concepts need to be reshaped and accommodated to the reality they wish to express. To apply the concepts exactly as they are understood in ordinary human language would lead to a distorted expression - an untruth. The mystery transcends all human thought patterns. Yet properly applied these can help towards the correct formulation of the mystery, its more precise understanding and its demarcation from error. This is the meaning of St. Augustine's dictum: Faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). It is the work of theology.

Three significant concepts have been used in the theology of the Trinity. They are: procession, relation and person. These terms have their direct or indirect support and foundation in Scripture. Through them we reflect on the Christian experience of God as Trinity.

2. Procession

In ordinary language this word means an orderly movement of people from one place to another. The word is derived from a latin root which means **origin**. We use this meaning for our purpose. Thus we can speak of the procession of a child from its mother. In this case, once the child is born it remains totally **distinct** from the mother. We can also speak of the procession of an idea from the mind. Here the idea remains within the mind and **not separated** from it. The idea is not a reality like the child.

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In applying the concept of procession to the Trinity we shape it by including the proper elements from both the examples. When we speak of the procession of the Son from the Father we mean :

The Son takes his **origin** from the Father

The Son is born as a **reality distinct** from the Father

Yet he is **not separated** from the Father but remains **within** him (immanent)

The Son who proceeds is **in no way inferior** to **nor** does he **post-exist** the Father from whom he **proceeds**.

The Bible often speaks of the Son as being the first-born, the only-begotten Son of God. God is the Father of Jesus Christ in a far more intimate way than that in which he is also father of all humankind. The concept of Father-Son implies a relation of origin between two who, as a necessary consequence, have to be distinct from each other (else there cannot be a relationship) but need not (and, in the case of the Trinity, cannot) be two separate entities. Procession is the name given to this mode of the Son's existence in the Godhead.

There are **two** processions in God. The Father is the **source**, the principle without a prior principle, the unoriginate originator. The Son proceeds from the Father in a beginningless, eternal process. This procession of the Son from the Father is also, and more often, called **generation**, referring to the parent-child analogy. The Spirit also proceeds but from both Father and Son who together constitute a joint originator. ("We believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son" - Mass creed). This procession is also called, though rarely, **spiration** (analogy of breathing). A frequently used analogy of the divine process is the mind generating thought and effecting love. Mind, thought and affection are mutually distinct and not identical yet all three make one person. **Father, Son and Holy Spirit are also distinct. One is not another. Yet all three constitute a single Godhead.**

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3. Relation

A relation is the order in which one thing or person stands to another. Thus David and Solomon were related as father and son, whereas David and Jonathan were related as friends. In the first case the relationship is of origin, in the second it is of love. In the human world relationships exist among discrete entities. In applying the concept of relation to the Trinity we eliminate the notion of discreteness but keep that of distinctness which is sufficient to have a real relationship.

The concept of relation as applied to the Trinity highlights its threeness, i.e., three distinct though not separated entities.

The Father-Son relation means that the Father or begetter, in as much as he is begetter, is **not** the Son or the begotten, and so also the Son in as much as he is begotten is **not** the begetter. The relations are thus based on origin or procession.

In the concept of procession, however, the same, single, identical divine nature, essence or substance is communicated among and shared by all three, thus forming a unity.

4. Person

A person is one who is capable of knowing and loving, who can take free decisions and who is endowed with autonomy and consciousness. A person develops as a person only in relation to other persons. It is part of the doctrine of the Church that plurality in the Godhead is best understood in terms of the three divine Persons. Various Church documents use the term person in speaking of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But if the concept of person is to be applicable to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it has to be shorn of all that connotes a separate entity with its own autonomy and consciousness. This cannot apply to the Trinity. The only element in the concept of person that is applicable and for which we use this concept of the Trinity is the **relationship to other persons**. The Son is constituted

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in his personhood by being related to the Father, a relation of originate to originator. The same applies to the Holy Spirit. There are no separate entities but certainly a distinction. The personal relationship among the Persons of the Trinity can be expressed even more richly than just as originator-originate. God is love in his very essence even before the divine love becomes manifest in the world through creation and salvation. Within God himself there is total self-communication, complete sharing, being fully for the other, a love-relationship. All this implies distinct others, i.e., someone distinct from another with whom he communicates, shares, relates and for whom he exists. It implies a plurality. The relationship of originator-originate, whether in generation or spiration is a love-relationship in which the complete and unique divine substance is communicated by the Father to the Son and by Father and Son to the Spirit.

The three are distinct yet bound into a unity of sharing the same identical substance or nature. God is a communion: a loving togetherness of three Persons in the unity of one nature. The Trinity is a mystery of love.

5. The Trinity in Salvation

A question that can arise is: if God is one in three, how can we say that only the Son became incarnate, and only the Spirit was sent at Pentecost?

The common understanding among theologians is that the functioning of the Trinity outside of itself, i.e. in the world, is an outflow of and hence patterned on its own inner structure. There are two ways in which the Trinity functions outside of itself. One kind of function is attributed to all three Persons taken together as a single principle. Creation is a typical example. All three are involved in the act of creation. Yet even in creation, Scripture takes into account the order of procession. According to John :

Through the Word all things came to be

Jn. 1:3

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See also Col 1:15-17, quoted earlier.

A second type of functioning of the Trinity outside of itself is made up of elements attributed as something proper to each one of the Persons and not to all three. This is what happens in salvation. Thus it is the Son and Son only who is incarnate. The process of salvation has three elements or stages.

i. The origin of the process through the divine will and plan to save.

ii. The incarnation, i.e. God among us.

iii. The indwelling, i.e. God within us.

i. The **origin** of our salvation is attributed to the will and plan of the Father. As St. Paul puts it:

> Before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his in Christ, ... Because of his love, God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would bring us to himself as his sons - this was his pleasure and purpose .... God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ.
>
> **Eph. 1:4, 5, 9**

In the garden, Christ prayed:

> 'My Father', he said, 'if this cup cannot pass by without my drinking it, your will be done'.
>
> **Mt. 26:42**

The specific role of the Father as originator of our salvation is the outward manifestation of his role within the Trinity where he is the origin of the Son and, through the Son, of the Spirit.

ii. The purpose of the **incarnation** is to reveal or make visible to us the glory and love of the Father. This is the specific role of the Son.

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> No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart who has made him known.
>
> **Jn 1:18**

and again,

> To have seen me is to have seen the Father.
>
> **Jn 14:9**

For St. Paul, Christ is the image of the unseen God (Col 1:15). Here again the revelatory role of the Son in the world is but the outflow of what he is within the Trinity - the Word or expression of the Father, generated by him. This Word spoken from all eternity becomes audible in the world through the incarnation. Another way in which Scripture speaks about the incarnation is the Father **sending** the Son into the world Jn 3:17, 8:18; Gal 4:4). **Mission** is the literal English translation of the Latin *Missio* which means sending.

Mission or the sending of the Son by the Father into the world is the event in the course of time which matches the eternal procession of the Son from the Father.

The same idea is expressed when Jesus says he has **come** from the Father.

The New Testament and the Fathers of the Church traditionally attribute the work of sanctification to the **indwelling** of the Holy Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit is given by the Father through the Son. This idea is expressed in the discourse at the Last Supper. Jesus himself sends the Spirit out from the Father (Jn 15:26; see also 14:16; 16:17).

This gift made to us jointly by the Father and the Son is what is also called GRACE. It is the process of spiration which existed in eternity and now becomes the divine breath in our hearts.

Creation is an act of love by which God calls us into existence. Salvation is an even more wonderful act

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of love. In it God calls us to share in his own inner life. It is because of this that the **salvific call gives us a revealing glimpse into that inner divine life and we discover it to be trinitarian**. The call to salvation and the very dynamics of salvation are thus cast in a trinitarian mould. The functioning of the Trinity in the economy of salvation is an outflow of and hence patterned on its own inner structure. When we respond to the divine salvific call the same trinitarian pattern appears. We receive the **Spirit**, the power that transforms us into the Father's children (Jn 1:12), images of his **Son**, who becomes the firstborn of many brothers and sisters (Rom 8:29, 30).

St. Paul's summing up of this theme in Eph 1 is well worth pondering over. It is the Father who chose us out of love in Christ to become his own adopted sons through Jesus Christ. Those who believe in Jesus are stamped with the seal of the Spirit.

Thus our salvific relationship is not just to God as such, but has a three-fold dimension. It is composed of relationships to each of the three divine Persons.

The Trinity as it operates in the economy of salvation and is revealed to us through our salvific relationship is called by theologians the economic Trinity. The trinitarian structure of God's inner life on which the salvific call and relationships are patterned is called the immanent Trinity.

VII. TRINITY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

a. Hinduism

In Hinduism there are two concepts that appear to come very 'close' to the Trinity. These are : **Trimurti and Saccidananda**. Both have been regarded as a wonderful climax of a very ancient tradition.

1. Trimurti

Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva constitute the Hindu triad called Trimurti. Though the Trimurti phenomenon is of quite recent appearance, each constituent of the

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triad has had a very distant and ancient origin. Brahma, the first of the triad, is accepted as the Brahman of the Upanisads now come down to us as the god of the popular pauranic religion. Whereas the Brahman of the Upanisads is impersonal, without any attributes or qualities, quite abstract and inaccessible to ordinary people, accessible only to the initiates, Brahma, the god of the pauranic days, is personal, endowed with gracious qualities like kindness, etc., and accessible to even ordinary people with simple devotion.

The second constituent of the Hindu triad is Shiva. It is held by scholars that Siva has perhaps the most ancient origin. The Rudra of the Rigveda has grown to become the Siva of the present day. Indeed, there is a strong opinion, well-founded and justifiable, that the Yogi-figure of Mohenjodaro is the earliest form of Siva. In that case Siva has had a still more ancient origin. Today Siva is the great god of *Saivasidhanta*, with its rich theology of grace and bhakti, well-developed and articulated by generations of competent theologians.

The third constituent of the Hindu triad is Vishnu, the god of Vaishnavism in India. Probably the most significant contribution of Vaishnavism is the elaboration of the theory of avatara or divine descent, a factor that greatly helped the popularization of Vaishnavism.

A study of the Trimurti leads to the following conclusions:

i. It is the result of the synthesizing tendency of Hinduism, which tries to go from the many to the One. Thus the multiplying of gods is reduced to three and eventually to one. Thus also the disparate cults and beliefs of Vaishnavism and Saivism are syncretized and find their unity in the formula of the Trimurti.

ii. It is only when the synthesis of the gods into three is effected, that the triple function of the Absolute in the world is distributed among them. Brahma expresses the origin of the world, Vishnu preserves and pervades it, whereas Siva is the god of transcendence who causes

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the world to be dissolved and absorbed into eternal bliss.

iii. The three deities are clearly distinguished from one another to the extent that they have fights among themselves. The gods originally belonged to distinct religions. Their fights probably echo the conflicts between their adherents over the superiority of their respective gods. The synthesizing power of Hinduism brought it about that the three were conceived as identical. Distinctions were thought to exist only on the superficial level of experience, whereas there is ultimate identity in a sphere beyond the grasp of man.

2. Saccidananda

The second, and the more important, concept of God in Hinduism is the well-known one of *Saccidananda*. The term is quite rich in content, and the culmination of a very interesting insight into the nature of the Supreme. The term *Saccidananda* is derived from a combination of three terms, *sat*, *cit* and *ananda*. We will briefly examine the meaning of each of these terms, and consider how that new combination is applied to the supreme Reality of the Upanisads.

The term *sat*, is the present participial form of the Sanskrit root *as*, meaning, **to be**, hence the meaning of *sat* will be being. Though simple in form, in content and import the word 'being' refers to the ultimate ground of all existence. All philosophies deal with the various aspects of this being.

In the Sanskrit as well as in the Indian philosophical tradition the term *sat* implies also **truth**. *Satyam* is a term commonly applied to everything that exists in this phenomenal world, and Brahman, the cause of all beings, is known as *satyasya satyam*, the Truth of truth. So the supreme Reality of the Upanisads is considered to be the cause of everything, the ultimate destiny of every being. Being, existence, reality, all these are thus variants of the term *sat*. God is *sat*.

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Cit in Sanskrit and Indian philosophical tradition implies consciousness, intellect etc. Another derived meaning of *cit* is knowledge. Reality is made up of consciousness, it is constituted of knowledge, these are two frequent assertions in the Upanisads. We may recall that consciousness is a form higher than pure sensation. Only immaterial realities can be said to have consciousness. According to the Upanisads, the being of Brahman is not only to have consciousness but to be consciousness. We may recall here how St. Thomas Aquinas defined God in terms of knowledge and love. God is pure intelligence, according to him. The similarity of thinking in both the traditions is worth noting.

The third term is *ananda*. *Ananda* means bliss, pleasure, joy etc. It is derived from the root *nand*, to rejoice, to be happy etc. Some of the Upanisadic asser ions convey the idea that Brahman is so perfect a being that he does not need anything more. The sense of happiness and satisfaction experienced by a perfect being can be said to be bliss. Bliss is deeper than joy or pleasure. The very essence or nature of the Supreme is regarded as bliss. Brahman is bliss.

In course of time these three supreme attributes of Brahman came to be identified one with the other, and eventually *saccidananda* as a term that can be identified with Brahman came into use.

Indian Christian theologians, eager for an interpretation of Christian thought in the light of these and similar Indian religious experiences, have always found the term *saccidananda* similar in many respects to the Trinity. Thus we have the well-known Bengali Brahmin convert to Christianity **Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya** who composed his famous trinitarian hymn **vande saccidanandam** (I adore you, Supreme Being constituted of sat, cit and ananda). The hymn succeeds in many ways to integrate Christian and Hindu religious thought and experience.

From the theological point of view there are certain problems. Some of these came to light when

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Bengali thinker **Keshub Chandra Sen** made another effort to bring together the great traditions. K. C. Sen found that the terms *sat, cit* and *ananda* can be quite well equated with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On a number of points these similarities do merge and mingle. But there are also problems. We have seen above that although the Father, the Son and the Spirit share one and the same Godhead, and consequently there is perfect unity, yet each of the three divine Persons remains distinct. But the terms *sat, cit* and *ananda* are attributes which are mutually identifiable. *Sat* is *cit*, but the Father is not the Son. Besides, *saccidananda* is said to be impersonal. It is known as *nirguna* Brahman. But the God of the Christian experience is personal and with attributes like kindness, love, mercy etc.

In spite of these differences, efforts continue to be made in order to integrate one with the other, keeping intact the specific revelation and its significance in Christian tradition.

b. Islam

Muslims find it difficult to understand how Christians with the belief in the Trinity can remain monotheists. The reason for this is the strong insistence on monotheism in Islam and on the divine transcendence which makes them deem it impossible to use human categories of thought for God. The words "father" and "son" quite naturally evoke carnal realities. Christians are so used to purge these terms of all natural connotations in applying them to God that they tend to overlook the serious difficulty others may have in doing the same.

In the Quran, the Trinity is wrongly understood as God, Jesus and Mary. The Quran also takes Christians to task for calling Jesus the Son of God, for the one and only God "neither begets nor is begotten".

In speaking with Muslims about the Trinity, we need to affirm quite definitely our own monotheism. We have to make it clear that the Trinity as revealed in Christianity concerns the inner life of God and in no way infringes on his oneness. The same God is Father, Son and Spirit.

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When speaking with Muslims, there should be no objection to avoiding the terms "nature" and "person" while trying to clarify further what distinguishes Father, Son and Spirit. Those terms could cause misunderstanding. Theologians (even Rahner) prefer to speak about the one God who subsists in three distinct manners of subsisting. Thus God is not like a monolith but is characterized by an inexhaustible inner richness of existence.

Finally, one should not disdain to have recourse to explanations of a metaphorical nature, e.g. fire, a single substance which is at the same time heat, flame and light; the sun, which is a mass of matter, and also light and heat; the human mind which is memory, understanding and will-power; a person and his reflection in a mirror etc.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is chiefly when man is involved in struggle that he has an experience of God. Hence we can say that a life situation is a medium through which divine intervention takes place, and this we find to be operative in all religions. **They have for their core a basic relationship and a sense of oneness**, a oneness that is constituted by God, man, creation and its unfolding process and expressed by sacrifice and other forms of offerings.

The specific Biblical experience offers us a trinitarian God, with his **inner relationships that imply plurality in the Godhead**. These relationships presuppose equality of persons, one common nature, perfect co-ordination of activities, etc.

This supreme model, found in the triune God, should become the model for the human community as well, since we have been created in the image and likeness of God.

Isolation, the opposite of relationship, is a most painful experience of man. The more crowded a city, the more isolated is the life of each individual. Persons do not live there, but only numbers. We find the city filled with functionaries: officers, soldiers, jailers, policemen,

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clerks, chaprasis, etc. All this points to an outmoded and anti-human categorization and it is urgent that these feudalistic designations and divisions of society be replaced by a different value system, where there is an emergence of 'persons', bound together by the bond of 'human relations'. The fundamental unity of all should lead to a rediscovery of the relationships that exist among members of society, even though each one may not be known to the others.

Religion often functions in isolation. Life-issues like economics, politics, science and its utilisation, all these move ahead guided by their own laws. These laws, because derived independently of a humanism that takes into account both the temporal and transcendent finality of man, often become anti-human, oppressive and dehumanizing. Equality of all as children of God, and the affirmation of one's rights that follows from this basic principle, have yet to gain acceptance in all fields of human activity. Probably the most crucial arena is the economic field. The most anti-human, anti-God values and trends prevail very often therein in an organized and structured way. The distribution of the produce of the earth is unjust and unequal. The contemplation of the Godhead, revealed to us as community of Persons, holding all things in a common bond, will have been fruitful and effective only when a just economic and social order emerges. A socialism of a kind, voiced by Pope John XXIII through his encyclicals, has yet to emerge. Only then will there be true human life. The goal of history seems to be this. Trinity is not the subject of mere speculation or piety. **Trinity, from this point of view, provides us with the most radical challenge.**

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